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ALAIN RENÉ LE SAGE. *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane*, trans. Tobias Smollett, ed. O M Brack, Jr. and Leslie Chilton. Athens: Georgia, 2011. Pp. ix + 695.

In his contribution to Blackwell's recent *Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel and Culture* (2009), Srinivas Aravamudan makes a compelling case that scholars have taken a largely "nationalist and xenophobic" approach to the novel and need to devote more attention to its investment in "narrative and cultural interchange." Perhaps no better starting point for such a project is Smollett, whose theories of the novel and work as a translator repeatedly draw the reader's attention to the influence that continental works had on the British novel. For example, in his famous preface to *Roderick Random*, Smollett acknowledges his debt to "Spanish and French authors" before singling out one work, in particular, as his "model": Alain René Le Sage's *Adventures of Gil Blas*.

Perhaps because he regarded it as the most “successful” example of modern novel writing, Smollett translated *Gil Blas* into English in 1748—an accomplishment of which he was so proud that when Nathaniel Dance painted him in 1764, he chose it as the “symbolic work” for his literary career. The recent addition of *Gil Blas* to Georgia’s *Works of Tobias Smollett*, therefore, importantly contributes to studies of Smollett and the novel.

Mr. Brack and Ms. Chilton deftly show how *Gil Blas* itself reflects the transnational literary landscape that Aravamudan complains has received such scant attention. According to the editors, the novel’s adaptation of “French comic romance, the apocryphal memoir, fable and Oriental tales” reflects the “increased literary borrowings” that took place during the seventeenth century. Wisely, they adopt an editorial strategy consistent with this theme of literary and cultural interchange. Rather than focusing on Le Sage’s narrative, they make the translation itself “the focus of the notes” by concentrating on Smollett’s departures from the French text and his use of idiomatic English and Scottish. Despite this emphasis on deviation in the notes, the editors stress the “fidelity” of Smollett’s translation in their Introduction, chalking up the deviations to the eighteenth century’s theory of translation, which privileged the translator’s style over slavish accuracy. However, such deviations might take on a more complex meaning when we place them in conversation with Smollett’s narrative theory. In the Preface to *Random*, he emphasizes the necessity of deviating from the “disgraces” of his continental model, which he defines as whatever is “uncommon, extravagant, or peculiar to the country in which the scene is laid.” The test for a novel’s success is, therefore, how well it can be translated,

based on the assumption that only the transnational is translatable. Of course, like Addison’s Royal Exchange, Smollett plants such transnationalism firmly on British literary soil by suggesting that his novel will be the first to follow a universal (British) standard of probability that is opposed to local eccentricities. It would be interesting to examine Smollett’s choices in translating *Gil Blas* in light of this theory of the novel as a form of translation.

My speculations here rest on the expanding body of scholarship that addresses the role of translation in the “rise” of the novel. To take one example, Mary Helen McMurrin’s *The Spread of Novels: Translation and Prose Fiction in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 2010) examines how the new approach to translating that emerged during the period was central to the way eighteenth-century writers thought about the novel’s origins. While such studies devote little space to Smollett, they offer much information about the business, practice, and theory of translation in which he would have been immersed—information that is lacking from the Introduction to *Gil Blas*. They also position Smollett’s translation work within broader scholarly debates about the novel. While such scholarship may not have been published at the time they wrote the Introduction, it was dismaying to see them rehash debates about the picaresque from the 1960s, which they admit have received only “passing references” in recent years.

Rather than focusing on Smollett’s translation and its place in eighteenth-century literary culture, Mr. Brack and Ms. Chilton mostly attend to the themes of the original. This would be appropriate for a teaching edition, but does not seem to me to be a wise choice for a scholarly one. Instead, I would have been interested to learn more about the reception of Smollett’s

work. As the editors note, *Gil Blas* was an immediate best seller in England and went through seven editions in Smollett's lifetime. They also rightly claim that the picaresque is a mutable form that takes different shapes based on the needs of the audience. What, then, were the needs of the English reading public in 1748 that made this particular picaresque so appealing? How might we link the novel's point that "life can be controlled" to anxieties that the British were experiencing at the time? How did readers' experience of Smollett's *Gil Blas* in 1770 differ from the experience of its initial readers in 1748? The introduction to the Georgia edition of *Roderick Random* does a wonderful job of tracing the cultural meanings and uses of that novel during the century after its publication. A similar history here might have been illuminating.

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